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SUBJECT: CONTRASTING PIOUS APPROACHES TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS

¶1. Summary. Analysts and the press often classify the participants in the battle for "Turkey's soul" to fit within one of two groups: the secular elite or the religious middle class. Such oversimplification fails to capture the complex state of play as Turkey transforms from a relatively closed elitist and statist past into a more open, diverse and tolerant society. Recent meetings with human rights groups Akder and Mazlumder demonstrated the futility of strict labels in Turkey and highlighted how groups can pursue a similar objective -- in this case ending the headscarf ban in universities -- for different reasons. The women of Akder believe the headscarf ban is a violation of basic human rights that in practice leads to greater domestic violence by preventing women from pursuing an education and learning their rights. Mazlumder considers the headscarf ban to be representative of the oppressive state's unjust approach to religious rights. End Summary.

Headscarved Lawyer Fights for Greater Rights

¶2. Fatma Benli is one of the five core members of Akder, an Istanbul-based consultancy group providing information and service for women's rights. The association contends it not only reports problems but "does something to change the situation." Benli said an example of Akder's impact was the GOT's inclusion of the majority of Akder's input for a 2008 report on women's rights except the portion pertaining to the right to wear a headscarf. She contends that the headscarf ban results in greater domestic violence as it prevents women from pursuing an education and learning their rights.

Akder's Activism Aims To Improve Women's Rights

¶3. According to Benli, a traditional outlook on the treatment of women continued to drive Turkish judicial decisions through the 20th century. However, openness to change accompanied EU accession plans, she explained. In 2004 the Ministry of Justice undertook a revision of the Turkish Penal Code in an effort to comply with EU accession requirements. Of the 37 new articles submitted by Akder for consideration in the 2004 revision, the Ministry accepted 30. After the amendments passed, Akder held group meetings to provide women with information about their new rights and published articles in an attempt to change the perspectives of reticent judges.

A More Traditional HR Organization: Mazlumder

¶4. The approach of Mazlumder, contrasts with Akder's strong focus on women's rights despite sharing a similarly pious membership base. President Ayhan Kucuk told us Mazlumder combats the headscarf ban because it is a form of human

oppression. Since its founding in 1991, Mazlumder has distinguished itself from other Turkish human rights organizations by combating equally all forms of oppression and injustice, using a "pious approach," according to Kucuk. (Note: Kucuk's claim is somewhat belied by the fact that Mazlumder in recent years has focused its energies on issues related to religion - the headscarf and imam hatip schools.) All of its board members are non-Kurdish Sunni Muslims and about 60 percent of their members are women, however the ten member board does not reflect this gender ratio. Throughout our meeting with association's board, only two women were present and despite Mazlumder's support for gender equality, neither participated actively in the discussion. Mazlumder continues to focus on the headscarf as an example of state interference in "just" gender access to education and interacts with Akder only in its role as a reporting association.

15. Comment: Though many analysts and press tend to simplify current events in Turkey as a battle between secular elite versus conservative religious types, the approach of two human rights groups pursuing similar goals demonstrates the political landscape is more complex. Both Mazlumder and Akder are working toward the same goal of ending the headscarf ban, but with different motives. End Comment.
WIENER